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Helms Apologizes for Letter Praising Fulbright Criticism

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WASHINGTON — Central Intelligence Agency Director Richard M. Helms apologized to and was forgiven by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Friday for praising a newspaper editorial criticizing Chairman J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.).

"He was very forthright, and I certainly accepted his apology," Fulbright said magnanimously after his committee had grilled Helms in secret session for about two hours.

Emerging from the meeting, held around a long, oval, green baize-covered table at which some senators sipped coffee and others sparkling alkaline water, Helms, 53, said:

"I realize it was a mistake. I regret it, and I have apologized."

Helms turned away with a faint, pained smile when reporters asked if he had thought of resigning as head of the CIA, a post he assumed one month ago amid high White House and other official praise as a cool, composed and competent

professional intelligence specialist.

CPYRIGHT In accepting Helms' apology, while tut-tutting him for a "mistake" in signing a letter to a St. Louis newspaper lauding its criticism of Fulbright as "crafty," Foreign Relations Committee members waved aside one of their colleagues' demands that the CIA chieftain resign.

The demand came from Sen. Wayne Morse (D-Ore.), who did not attend the Friday meeting with Helms. Morse, who also calls occasionally on Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara to resign, said Helms had dabbled in domestic politics and therefore should resign.

Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.) dismissed the Morse demand. Mansfield said Helms made a mistake in signing the letter, but had "faced up to it (and) should be given a chance."

"We all make mistakes," Mansfield added philosophically. "If we had to resign when we make mistakes, the whole Senate would have to resign."

The Helms episode, which raised outcries from his senatorial friends and foes alike on the propriety of his letter, also established the CIA director as one of the fastest pens in Washington.

According to Fulbright, one of Helms' aides drafted the letter to the St. Louis newspaper, the Globe-Democrat, and presented it to the CIA chief with several others.

Helms confessed at the secret session, Fulbright

said, that "his attention did not focus as thoroughly as it should have on the significance of the letter" before he signed and mailed it.

Helms' letter to the newspaper lauded one of its editorials praising the Senate for shelving a Fulbright - led attempt to broaden senatorial supervision of the CIA. Fulbright suggested Helms had involved himself in domestic political matters by writing the letter.

The Arkansan has been campaigning for Foreign Relations Committee participation in the subcommittee — composed of members of the Armed Forces and Appropriations committees—which review CIA activities. Fulbright had indicated he wanted to question the CIA about its affairs at home and activities abroad.



FORGIVEN—Richard M. Helms, left, Central Intelligence Agency director, shares a joke with Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.) after apologizing for a letter praising editorial criticism of the senator. (AP Wirephoto)

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